

Read pages 82-85 of Chapter 9.

1. Analyse how a significant event illustrated one or more key themes in the written text.

“Before I can live with other folks, I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.”

In To Kill A Mockingbird, by Harper Lee, Atticus Finch is the moral compass of the novel. His words and actions stand in contrast to much of what is seen from the rest of the fictional town of Maycomb set in the early 1930’s in America’s Deep South. The town of Maycomb is largely presented in a positive light, until Atticus agrees to defend Tom Robinson, a black man who has been accused of raping a white woman. Possibly inspired by the real life case of the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama, Lee uses this significant event to expose the fears and prejudice of the local community as they turn against the Finches. Atticus’ courage in the face of the town’s hostility serves to emphasise the cowardliness of those around him and his lack of prejudice is in stark contrast to the racist society in which he lives.

Fear and prejudice go hand in hand and Lee illustrates this theme through the words and actions of Atticus. It is at the start of chapter nine that the reader discovers Atticus’ decision to defend Tom Robinson. Scout is distraught at hearing Cecil Jacobs announce at school that, “Scout Finch’s daddy defended niggers.” At several points in the novel, children are heard repeating the words of adults, whether they understand them or not. Scout calls their snowman a “morphodite” because she has misheard Miss Maudie referring to it as a ‘hermaphrodite.’ In the same way, the reader can infer that Cecil is repeating words that he has heard from the adults in his life and is expressing the views of at least some of the townspeople. This is confirmed when Scout returns to school and commands Cecil to take back his words. Instead, he insists that his parents told him that Atticus was a disgrace and Tom Robinson should be lynched. Given that lynch mobs were a very real danger at the time, these are no idle threats being made. Furthermore, the confrontation with Cecil can be seen as foreshadowing the night the Old Sarum mob go to the jail to lynch Tom. However, in that situation, Scout is unaware of the danger and it is her innocent words, rather than her fists, that unwittingly save Tom.

When Scout asks Atticus about Cecil’s words, his immediate response is to correct her terminology and insist that she say “Negroes” rather than “niggers.” The word ‘Negro’ is from the Spanish and Portuguese word for ‘black’ and, at least in the time period of the novel, would have been a respectful way of referring to a black person. On the other hand, ‘nigger’ was a very pejorative term and used to indicate disdain. When Atticus says, “Don’t say nigger, Scout. That’s common,” his disapproval of this particular aspect of society is made apparent. Scout’s argument that it is what everybody at school says makes no greater impact on him. He insists, “From now on, it’ll be everybody less one,” clearly demonstrating that the majority should not influence an individual’s ethical decisions. As elsewhere in the novel, the manner in which the viewpoints are expressed is also significant. Cecil is taunting Scout in the playground and his words seem childish, immature and spiteful. This exposes the racist attitude for what it is and makes it easier to see the adult characters who hold these attitudes in the same light. In contrast, Atticus is both mature and calm in his correction of Scout. He is presented as sensible, rational and kind. Those full of fear and prejudice resort to violence and lynching; those with moral integrity do not resort to such violence. This leads the reader to admire Atticus’ position; particularly since it is a minority view for this time and place. It has already been noted, however, that Atticus’ conscience isn’t dictated to by majority opinion.

The theme of the town’s prejudice is further illustrated as Atticus explains to Scout about the Tom Robinson case. He tells her that Tom lives, “in that little settlement beyond the town dump.” Geographically, this is another indicator of social inequalities as well as a hint at the town’s social hierarchy. At the fringe of society, just before the town dump, live the Ewell’s – Maycomb’s white trash family. However, beyond even that lowly point is where the black community is to be found. Harper Lee here shows Atticus rising above Maycomb’s petty prejudices as he informs Scout that the Robinsons are, “clean-living folks.” This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, he has received this information from Calpurnia, the Finch’s African-American housekeeper, and the fact that Atticus respects her opinions is an indication that he lacks the racial prejudice of the local community. Secondly, it shows that Atticus

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judges people by their character and actions, rather than their social status, gender or the colour of their skin. He sees others as equals and always tries to see things from their perspective. This empathy, which is the antithesis of prejudice, is what enables him to get into another man's skin "and walk around in it."

Harper Lee uses Atticus' decision to defend Tom Robinson as an opportunity to show how social change can come about. The Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation were to continue in force until 1965 and would only be removed by people taking courageous moral stands in the way that Atticus Finch does in the novel. One part of the problem that Atticus tries to explain to Scout is that: "This time we aren't fighting the Yankees, we're fighting our friends." However, the very fact that he tries to explain these complex issues to his children is a sign of his strength as a character and his desire to bring about change. He knows that the majority are in the wrong and that it is the responsibility of moral individuals to take a stand and set an example, to be a shining light for others to follow. Like other great civil rights activists, Atticus' approach is pacifist. He instructs Scout to, "Try fighting with your head for a change." Atticus likens the situation to the American Civil War and tells Scout that it doesn't even make a difference that they might be fighting a losing battle. In this, the reader is warned again that the Tom Robinson case is likely to be lost, but emphasises that this isn't the point. It is important to take a stand for what is right and that is exactly what he is doing by taking the case.

A glimmer of hope is given when Scout confronts Cecil Jacobs back at school and he refuses to take his words back. She has learnt a valuable lesson and reports that: "Somehow, if I fought Cecil I would let Atticus down." Although this is soon to be challenged by her cousin, Francis, Scout is beginning to see that she must stand up for what she believes to be right and that there is merit in doing so without resorting to violence. This is a clear illustration of Harper Lee's central message in the novel, that societal inequalities must be challenged peacefully, but without compromise.